Responsive parliament

Contents

Sub-target 4 – Responsive parliament ................................................................. 2

Indicator 4.1 – Valuing public concerns ................................................................. 3

Dimension 4.1.1 Responding to public concerns ....................................................... 4
Dimension 4.1.2 Responding to emerging policy issues ............................................ 7
Dimension 4.1.3: Responding to individual members of the public, including constituents ................................................................. 10
Sub-target 4 – Responsive parliament

Responsive parliament is one that is:
- Open and responsive to the public
- Open and responsive to policy developments

This sub-target on responsive parliament is the fourth element of the Sustainable Development Goal target 16.7 on responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative parliaments. Parliament, as the main representative political institution, should be open to and value public concerns, take proper steps to ensure that channels are open to receive them, be able to respond to emerging policy issues and emergencies in a timely and efficient manner, and communicate with all relevant stakeholders to ensure inclusive and informed policy decisions and responses.

A responsive parliament should be able to value and address public concerns, whether expressed collectively or individually, including contemporary or emerging issues that arise unexpectedly. Parliament should demonstrate that it has the necessary channels, interest, engagement and willingness to receive and then resolve issues of public concern, even when these issues do not appear to be a primary responsibility of the legislator. For this purpose, the parliament needs to have suitable channels to receive concerns and give them recognition so that they can be addressed. At the same time, it is important for individual MPs to establish timely, direct and meaningful communication with the electorate, and to respond to their needs and requests.

The sub-target on responsive parliament comprises the following indicator:

- 4.1 Valuing public concerns
Indicator 4.1 – Valuing public concerns

Having a framework to channel and recognize public concerns for parliament is key to enabling parliament to respond to serious issues and emergencies arising in the community, and to the appeals of individual members of the public. This will define whether parliament is perceived by the public as its representative. Parliament’s openness and responsiveness to public concerns is key to building trust towards the parliament and individual MPs.

Millions of people reach out to their representatives every year with regard to their individual concerns and issues of common concern to the public or to groups of society. Parliaments have to demonstrate their openness to receiving these concerns so that they are then in a position to address such issues in a timely and effective manner. Even when public attention is directed towards other institutions or stakeholders, parliament, as a representative body, has to demonstrate its interest, engagement and efforts in resolving the issue of public concern. In order to adjust to changing public needs, parliaments need to have a suitable and flexible framework for matters of concern to be raised with the parliamentary institution or individual MPs.

This indicator also covers parliamentary responses to issues that emerge outside of medium- or long-term planning.

By providing a timely and high-quality response to individual citizens (their letters, emails or other forms of communication), parliament also demonstrates its attention to the needs of the public.

The assessment of the indicator on valuing public concerns comprises the following dimensions:

- 4.1.1 Responding to public concerns
- 4.1.2 Responding to emerging policy issues
- 4.1.3 Responding to individual members of the public, including constituents
**Dimension 4.1.1 Responding to public concerns**

Indicator 4.1: Valuing public concerns  
Sub-target: 4 Responsive parliament  
Target: 16.7 Responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative parliament

**About the dimension**

This dimension outlines the duty of parliament to be responsive to the needs of people, to recognize them and address them with due attention.

A rapidly changing world demands responsive parliaments that listen to the voices of their communities and act to address the issues that matter to the public. Parliaments are expected to adapt and revitalize their practices and processes, if they are to keep up with public expectations in a world that is connected, creative and collaborative. Parliamentarians, committees, political groups and parliament as an institution are required to keep a finger on the public pulse, to be flexible and to react in a timely way. Parliamentary processes must ensure that public needs and concerns are brought to the attention of the parliament. Responsive policy-making should reflect and give expression to the will of the people.

The challenging task for parliaments and MPs is to operationalize concepts such as people’s or public will, needs, wishes, interests and concerns. People are not a homogeneous block. They have multiple and often conflicting interests and diverse perspectives. Parliaments need to apply nuanced approaches and develop comprehensive policies based on a wider perspective, with an eye to the future. It is vital for parliaments to understand and take into account diverse audiences, including groups that raise their voices and those that often remain silent.

Collecting information from different sources and through different channels can help to identify and understand real people’s needs. Interest groups and civil society actors are often seen as channels through which citizens can express their opinions to policymakers. They are an important link between citizens and parliament and a valuable source of information. However, they represent the interests of specific groups of people which do not necessarily correspond to the interests of both the majority and different minority groups. A balanced approach and additional research, including surveys, focus groups, interviews, media and social media, can help parliament to be attentive to the needs of different groups that might be affected, and to matters that would otherwise not appear on the parliamentary agenda and would risk being overlooked.

Recognizing and responding to public concerns may require parliaments to adapt parliamentary procedures and processes that allow public concerns to be conveyed to the parliament, and be addressed and responded to, and to make cultural and organizational shifts, by reassessing parliamentary tasks and attitudes. Parliamentary staff should find new ways to manage significantly increased amounts of information, particularly on sensitive or controversial topics, to analyse this information and clearly and concisely present it to MPs and, finally, to translate public needs into tangible legislative or policy outcomes.

While not every demand can or should be met, it is important not to ignore or overlook the efforts of the public to influence what parliament and government do. Closing a feedback loop is equally important as it cultivates a feeling of genuine engagement and influence over the decisions taken, and creates a culture of responsiveness and learning that makes interventions more adaptive and effective.

---

On the basis of a global comparative analysis of parliamentary practices and models in parliamentary development, an aspiring goal for parliaments in the domain of responding to public concerns would encompass the following:
The rules of procedure and practices of the legislature provide for a framework for public concerns to be brought to the attention of the parliament. The framework includes specific procedures for setting the agenda of the plenary and committees that enable public needs to be identified, recognized and addressed.

There are well-established mechanisms and practices for cooperation with a broad range of civil society actors and diverse interest groups, which facilitates the raising of public concerns in parliament and a better understanding of such concerns.

Parliamentary administration has the capacity to collect and analyse information from different sources concerning specific public demands, as a basis for parliamentary debate and decision-making.

Parliament has introduced an obligation and an established practice concerning the provision of feedback to public groups that have voiced their needs and concerns. Processes and decisions made on such initiatives are effectively communicated to the public.

Assessment

The dimension is evaluated on the basis of several criteria that should be assessed separately. For each criterion, select one of the six descriptive grades (Non-existent, Poor, Basic, Good, Very good and Excellent) that corresponds best to your parliament, and provide details of the evidence on which the assessment is based.

The evidence for assessment of this dimension might include:
- Rules of procedure, practices, processes and mechanisms that support responsive decision-making
- Evidence of public concerns being raised and responded to by parliament
- Evidence of legislative or policy outcomes as a response to public needs and concerns
- Evidence of information collected and analysed by the administration

If relevant, additional comments or examples that support the assessment (such as references to external national, regional or international surveys and reports) can be provided.

Assessment criterion No. 1: Framework for public concerns to be raised and recognized

The parliamentary rules of procedure or statutory provisions, including those on the setting of the agenda of the plenary and committees, enable public needs and demands to be raised, recognized and addressed in the parliament, even if they are not specifically directed to parliament.

Evidence for this assessment criterion:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-existent</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Very good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Assessment criterion No. 2: Cooperation with stakeholders

There is evidence of established mechanisms and practices for cooperation with diverse civil society actors and interest groups, as well as governmental and independent agencies, which are aimed at identifying, raising and addressing public concerns.
Indicators for democratic parliaments, based on SDG targets 16.6 and 16.7

Evidence for this assessment criterion:

**Assessment criterion No. 3: Administrative support for responsive decision-making**

Parliamentary administration has the capacity to collect and analyse information from different sources concerning specific public demands, which can inform parliamentary debate and decision-making.

Evidence for this assessment criterion:

**Recommendations for change**
Dimension 4.1.2 Responding to emerging policy issues

Indicator: 4.1. Valuing public concerns
Sub-target: 4. Responsive parliament
Target: 16.7 Responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative parliament

About the dimension

This dimension outlines actions of parliament that demonstrate its response to issues emerging outside of medium- or long-term planning. All societies may face unforeseen issues or developments that sometimes attract massive public attention and could become matters of common concern. Parliament’s ability to respond to such circumstances in a prompt and convincing way is an important element in establishing public trust towards the legislature.

Emerging issues can be any critical event or situation, such as natural disasters, threats to democracy or outbreaks of a quarantinable disease (Note that dimension 1.3.3 addresses the procedures adopted by parliament in the case of an emergency.) This also entails any emerging issue that can have an adverse impact on people or political, social and economic development, or the environment or climate. Sometimes, a pressing local situation that causes public concern and can have a significant impact should be brought to the attention of the national arena.

Even if parliament is not a primary target of such concerns and public attention is directed towards other institutions or stakeholders, parliament has to demonstrate its ability and efforts to resolve the issue of public concern. Parliament is expected to use its unique position as a representative institution to recognize and respond to emerging issues, debate and consider their implications, and help to provide consensual and practical solutions. The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the global need for parliaments to adjust their work to new circumstances during emergencies, and to play an active role in overcoming the crisis.

The parliament’s work process and agenda are usually pre-defined and planned well in advance and, consequently, might lack flexibility. The work process of the parliament and its committees and political groups, should provide sufficient flexibility for adjusting to emerging issues. Parliament and its relevant bodies should be able to organize meetings, virtually and at short notice, if necessary, with the representatives of the public concerned, and collect information for taking subsequent action. Effective and regular cooperation and information-sharing with a range of relevant governmental and non-governmental stakeholders can be crucial for parliament to effectively address emerging issues.

Organizing a political debate and applying its oversight mandate are often the most effective ways for parliament to engage. Parliament should have flexibility in its procedures to call urgent debates or to summon relevant officials, request information, determine how the government as a whole, or individual ministries or public bodies are dealing with the current issue of public concern, and conclude whether adjustments are needed. The parliament should be able to set an agenda on such issues.

On the basis of a global comparative analysis of parliamentary practices and models in parliamentary development, an aspiring goal for parliaments in the domain of responding to emerging policy issues would encompass the following:

Parliamentary rules of procedure/standing orders allow sufficient flexibility for the plenary, parliamentary committees, political groups and other parliamentary bodies to call political debates, ask questions, summon officials or apply other oversight actions in response to any emerging issues that might arise and cause public concern.

Parliament reacts to such issues promptly, even if the public concerns are not directly addressed to the parliament. Parliamentary committees, political groups and MPs meet with the representatives of the public voicing the concerns and establish effective communication with them. In addressing emerging issues, parliament regularly collaborates and shares information with a range of both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders.

Parliament holds debates, summons officials, organizes hearings and effectively communicates with the public in response to emerging public concerns.

**Assessment**

The dimension is evaluated on the basis of several criteria that should be assessed separately. For each criterion, select one of the six descriptive grades (Non-existent, Poor, Basic, Good, Very good and Excellent) that corresponds best to your parliament, and provide details of the evidence on which the assessment is based.

The evidence for assessment of this dimension might include:

- Specific articles of the rules of procedure setting flexible rules for the organization of debates and use of oversight tools
- Examples of parliamentary engagement in resolving emerging issues
- Examples of parliamentary cooperation on emerging issues and public concerns, including meetings conducted by the parliamentary committees, political groups and other parliamentary bodies with relevant stakeholders

If relevant, additional comments or examples that support the assessment (such as references to external national, regional or international surveys and reports) can be provided.

**Assessment criterion No. 1: Legal framework providing for thorough and timely responses to emerging issues**

There is evidence that the provisions of parliamentary rules of procedure/standing orders give the plenary, parliamentary committees, political groups and other parliamentary bodies the flexibility to call political debates, ask questions, summon officials or apply other oversight actions in response to emerging issues and public concerns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-existent</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Very good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Evidence for this assessment criterion:

**Assessment criterion No. 2: Addressing emerging issues**

There is evidence of parliament reacting to emerging issues and public concerns promptly, even when the concerns are not directed towards the parliament per se.
Sub-target 1 – Responsive parliament

Indicators for democratisation of parliaments, based on SDG targets 16.6 and 16.7

Assessment criterion No. 3: Cooperation and communication with stakeholders

In addressing emerging issues, parliament establishes regular cooperation and information-sharing with governmental and independent agencies, as well as with civil society and other non-governmental stakeholders. Parliamentary committees, political groups and MPs also meet with the representatives of the public voicing the issues of concern and establish effective communication with them.

Recommendations for change

Evidence for this assessment criterion:
**Dimension 4.1.3: Responding to individual members of the public, including constituents**

Indicator: 4.1 Valuing public concerns  
Sub-target: 4. Responsive parliament  
Target: 16.7 Responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative parliament

**About the dimension**

This dimension outlines ways and practices that MPs and the parliament as an institution generally use to provide timely and relevant responses to communications from individual members of the public. Direct communication with the public is key for elected officials to effectively represent and respond to their constituents’ needs in the legislature. Citizens expect to be able to easily access their parliament and MPs, and to receive meaningful responses and support from them.

Parliamentary rules of procedure/standing orders or statements of standards of service usually oblige committees and other units of parliament to consider letters and any other communication submitted, and to respond within a certain deadline. Very often, individual citizens directly address an MP or parliamentary group, using different means of communication. The MP or parliamentary group is expected to be responsive to the issues raised by each citizen. Proper responses to individual members of the public may also require the opportunity to meet with the elected representative.

Providing timely responses to members of the public is crucial though insufficient. Responsiveness to members of the public requires not only timely, but also high-quality responses to individual letters and emails or other forms of communication used by citizens. The key elements of a meaningful response to members of the public include: (a) information on the relevant authority that will address the issue; (b) information or an opinion on a policy issue; and (c) commitment to a specific action to resolve the issue.

Responding to different issues of personal interest for which individual members of the public seek a response from parliament requires well-organized work processes to receive, respond to and track progress on the resolution of citizens’ problems. MPs and relevant parliamentary bodies should work with the public administration to help solve individual problems (cases) of citizens. In some situations, it may be necessary to refer a case that goes beyond the mandate of the MP or the parliament to a relevant institution. It is equally important to keep citizens informed about the steps taken to resolve an issue, and to update them on the progress made.

Timely and meaningful communication between the parliament and the members of the public requires support from qualified and trained staff through solid communication skills and experience in politics and/or administration. Support staff should keep record of visits, letters and emails and must ensure timely follow-up to the cases of citizens.

---

On the basis of a global comparative analysis of parliamentary practices and models in parliamentary development, an aspiring goal for parliaments in the domain of responding to individual members of the public, including constituents would encompass the following:

Parliamentary rules of procedure/standing orders or statements of standards of service establish an obligation and clear deadlines for committees and other units of parliament to consider submitted letters and other correspondence from members of the public, and to respond to them accordingly. If issues raised by the members of the public in their appeals go beyond the mandate of the MP or parliament, they are forwarded to the relevant state institution.

---

2 See dimension 1.9.2 which covers constituency relations.
MPs and their constituency outreach offices respond to and track progress on the resolution of citizens’ appeals. MPs and relevant parliamentary bodies work together with the public administration to help to resolve individual problems (cases) of citizens.

Support staff make sure that all submissions from citizens to the parliament have been responded to in a timely way, keep records of their visits, letters and emails, and ensure timely and meaningful follow-up to their cases.

Assessment

The dimension is evaluated on the basis of several criteria that should be assessed separately. For each criterion, select one of the six descriptive grades (Non-existent, Poor, Basic, Good, Very good and Excellent) that corresponds best to your parliament, and provide details of the evidence on which the assessment is based.

The evidence for assessment of this dimension might include:

- Specific articles of the rules of procedure or statements of standards of service setting deadlines for responding to applications from individual members of the public
- Specific articles of the national legislation or statements of standards of service establishing clear and transparent procedures for forwarding communication from parliament to relevant institutions
- Number of constituency outreach offices, information about meeting days, hours and venues, if available to the parliament
- Number of constituency letters, emails and visits per year, if available to the parliament
- Number of responses to letters, emails and other appeals by the constituents, if available to the parliament
- Parliamentary reports on parliamentary responses to individual members of the public
- Information about the support staff
- Records of timely and meaningful communication with members of the public

If relevant, additional comments or examples that support the assessment (such as references to external national, regional or international surveys and reports) can be provided.

Assessment criterion No. 1: Legal framework for timely responses to members of the public

The provisions of parliamentary rules of procedure/standing orders or statements of standards of service set clear deadlines for committees and other units of parliament to consider and respond to the letters or applications submitted by members of the public.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-existent</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Very good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Evidence for this assessment criterion:

Assessment criterion No. 2: Forwarding citizen applications to relevant institutions

There are legal provisions or statements of standards of service that establish that letters, appeals or issues falling outside the mandate of MPs or the parliament should be forwarded or redirected to the relevant state institutions.
Indicators for democratisation of parliaments, based on SDG targets 16.6 and 16.7

Sub-target 1 – Responsive parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-existent</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Very good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Evidence for this assessment criterion:

Assessment criterion No. 3: Follow-up to cases raised by citizens

There is evidence that parliament or MPs respond to citizens’ submissions in a regular and timely way, and that they follow-up on visits, letters, emails or other forms of communication with members of the public. Parliament keeps records of this communication and ensures follow-up to the cases raised by citizens.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-existent</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Very good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Evidence for this assessment criterion:

Recommendations for change